

From Foreign Wine to Local Delicacy: The Localization Transformation of Grape Wine in the Tang Dynasty

Li Jie*

Institute of Regional and National Studies, Xi'an Shiyu University, Xi'an, Shaanxi 710065, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: Grape wine was introduced to the Central Plains from Central Asia via the Silk Road and underwent an identity transformation from “foreign goods” to “local delicacies” during the Tang Dynasty. Taking Emperor Taizong’s “modification of winemaking” as a pivotal event, this paper examines, based on extant literature such as Tang Huiyao, Taiping Yulan, and New Book of Tang, as well as unearthed documents from Turpan, how the Tang court selectively adopted and adapted Western winemaking knowledge using local brewing traditions as a benchmark. It analyzes how the improved grape wine was institutionalized through the tribute system and the documentation of famous wines, and explores the process by which it ultimately acquired a local identity in social consumption. The study reveals that the localization of grape wine in the Tang Dynasty was not due to its superiority as a foreign product but rather because the Central Plains society systematically reorganized and redefined it using existing brewing systems, institutional frameworks, and cultural expressions.

Keywords: Tang Dynasty; Grape wine; Modification of winemaking; Localization; Silk Road

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1. Introduction

The material and cultural exchanges along the Silk Road have been extensively studied, with a focus on the process of “introduction” itself. However, discussions on what happened after the introduction of foreign objects and how the receiving side handled this foreign knowledge remain relatively weak. Xiang Da examined the overall pattern of the acceptance of Western civilization in Chang’an during the Tang Dynasty, while Edward H. Schafer cataloged foreign products in the Tang Dynasty from the perspective of “exotic goods”^[1-2]. However, as the case of grape wine illustrates, introduction is merely the starting point. What is more worthy of inquiry is how a foreign beverage completed its identity transformation from “foreign goods” to “local delicacies” in less than a century. What logic did the Central Plains society follow to accept,

modify, and redefine it? This question touches upon a prevalent methodological issue in the study of Silk Road cultural exchanges: people are accustomed to tracing “where it came from” but often overlook “what happened after it arrived.” Introduction is merely a physical displacement, while localization is the true “arrival” in a cultural sense.

This paper argues around the key historical fact of Emperor Taizong’s “modification of winemaking”, attempting to demonstrate that the localization transformation of grape wine in the Tang Dynasty was not a simple cultural transfer but a process of selective absorption and systematic reorganization of foreign knowledge within the framework of existing brewing techniques, institutional systems, and cultural perceptions in the Central Plains.

Specifically, the paper proceeds as follows: First, it examines the ways and prerequisites through which the Tang Dynasty acquired knowledge of grape winemaking. Second, centered on Emperor Taizong’s “modification of winemaking”, it analyzes the internal mechanisms by which the Central Plains selectively modified foreign techniques from the dimensions of “reduction” and “enhancement.” Third, it examines the identity transformation of grape wine through two institutional indicators: the tribute system and the documentation of famous wines. Finally, it introduces a comparative case of kumis to discuss the conditions and boundaries of localization.

2. Historical background of the eastward transmission of grape wine

The introduction of grape wine knowledge to the Central Plains was not accomplished overnight. As early as the Western Han Dynasty, Zhang Qian’s expedition to the Western Regions introduced grape varieties. According to the *Records of the Grand Historian: Biography of Dayuan*, “In Dayuan and its vicinity, they made wine from grapes. The wealthy stored wine up to over ten thousand dan, and some aged for decades without spoiling”^[3]. However, at this time, mainly seedlings were introduced, and brewing techniques did not spread eastward simultaneously. Yue Dong’s research indicates that during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, the Gaoche tribe acquired grape winemaking techniques from the Sogdian region in Gaochang. After the decline of the Gaoche, they submitted to the Northern Wei Dynasty, and winemaking knowledge spread to the Central Plains^[4]. Wei Zheng of the early Tang Dynasty came from a Gaoche family and was skilled in brewing grape wine, indicating that the elite in the Central Plains were not entirely unfamiliar with grape wine during the early Zhenguan period. However, such sporadic contacts were far from sufficient to constitute systematic knowledge accumulation. The true turning point depended on the acquisition of a complete knowledge system.

The “Account of Grape Acreage and Wine Rent of Zhang Wushun and Others in Gaochang”, unearthed from Turpan, provides detailed records of the planting areas and wine rent quantities of 76 vineyard owners, indicating that the officialdom of Qu’s Gaochang had established a systematic grape planting management and wine rent collection system^[5]. This means that when the Tang army pacified Gaochang in the 14th year of Zhenguan (640 AD), they faced not scattered techniques but an institutionalized grape wine production system. After pacifying Gaochang, the Tang court acquired both varieties and brewing methods in their entirety, providing a necessary prerequisite for subsequent localization modifications. It also meant that the Central Plains faced not just a commodity but a foreign technical system that required a response. Previously, Cao Pi’s “Letter to Court Officials” had recommended grape wine to his ministers, describing it as “sweeter than qu wine, causing a pleasant drunkenness and easy sobriety”^[6]. However, he had to position grape

wine using the taste of traditional qu wine in the Central Plains to help others understand the new product, indicating that most people at the time had never tasted it and needed a local reference frame to comprehend the new thing. This mode of “understanding foreign objects through existing knowledge frameworks” reappeared in a more systematic way in Emperor Taizong’s later “modification” practices.

3. “Modification of winemaking” and the Tang court’s selection of knowledge

The events following the pacification of Gaochang constitute the core of the argument presented in this paper. Volume 100 of the Tang Huiyao records: “Grape wine exists in the Western Regions. In previous eras, there may have been tributes, but after the conquest of Gaochang, mare’s milk grapes were collected and planted in the imperial gardens, along with their winemaking techniques. The emperor modified these techniques to create his own wine, which came in eight colors, with a fragrant and intense aroma, and a taste that surpassed even the finest dairy products. After distributing it to his ministers, the people of the capital began to appreciate its flavor” ^[7]. Volume 844 of the Taiping Yulan also mentions “a taste that surpasses even the finest dairy products”, with slightly different wording but consistent facts ^[6]. The phrase “self-modification” indicates that Emperor Taizong’s attitude towards the Western winemaking techniques was neither a wholesale adoption nor a complete dismissal but rather a selective approach based on certain criteria. “Modification” originates from the Book of Changes, referring to the principles of increase and decrease. Emperor Taizong’s application of this concept to winemaking practice demonstrates his clear understanding of the purpose of this technological introduction: not to learn from the West but to transform it.

What was “reduced”? Traditional Central Asian grape winemaking relied on the natural fermentation of yeast present on the grape skins, with a preference for long-term aging. The Records of the Grand Historian’s account of Dayuan, where “some wines aged for decades without spoiling”, reflects this tradition. However, drinking habits in the Central Plains emphasized consuming freshly brewed wine. The traditional brewing techniques recorded in the Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People focused on seasonal fresh brews, with a rhythmic emphasis on “spring wine” and “autumn brew”, in stark contrast to the long-term aging of Western wines. Drinking occasions in the Central Plains were often imperial banquets or literary gatherings, where wine served not only to satisfy the palate but also as a medium for maintaining social etiquette. There was a set of expectations based on local experience regarding the taste, color, and drinking methods of wine. The naturally fermented grape wines from the West, with their acidity, body, and preservation methods, fell short of these expectations and would have struggled to fit into the banquet scenes of the Central Plains without modification. In other words, what the Tang court “reduced” was not technically inferior aspects but those incompatible with the local cultural order. The selection criteria were always based on the Central Plains’ own dietary etiquette. Additionally, certain Western drinking practices that pursued extreme potency were incompatible with the Central Plains’ etiquette of “gentle and moderate” drinking. What the Tang court “reduced” were precisely these aspects that conflicted with the Central Plains’ dietary order, not due to technical inferiority but cultural incompatibility.

What was “added”? After examining Tang Dynasty cuisine, Wang Saishi pointed out that the core feature of Central Plains brewing traditions lay in the use of yeast. By the Tang Dynasty, brewing techniques inherited from qu (a type of yeast) had become quite mature, forming a complete process system with yeast strains and fermentation temperature as the core variables ^[9]. Faced with a foreign technique that did not use yeast, it was almost inevitable to graft their most proficient fermentation methods onto it. During the Tang

Dynasty, a wide variety of yeast-added grape wines emerged, particularly red yeast grape wines, marking the systematic grafting of the Central Plains' most core fermentation techniques onto foreign brewing ^[9]. Natural fermentation was partially replaced by yeast fermentation, thereby incorporating the foreign product into a technical framework that the locals could understand and control. This was precisely the essence of "addition", not the arbitrary addition of new elements but the grafting of processes based on the existing experience of the Central Plains.

Now, considering the evaluation criteria for the finished product. The phrase "eight colors" indicates that the Tang people pursued visual richness in the finished product, whereas Sogdian traditional grape wines were predominantly red and did not emphasize "multicoloredness." The term "surpassing even the finest dairy products" uses a concept from Central Plains Buddhist discourse to describe the purest and most exquisite taste, showing that the Tang people evaluated the modified grape wine using entirely existing taste classifications and cultural discourses from the Central Plains. The pursuit of visual diversity in the finished product, as indicated by "eight colors", reflects the projection of Central Plains aesthetic standards, as Sogdian traditional grape wines did not prioritize "multicoloredness." The naming of varieties also followed this pattern: "mare's milk" was a description of the fruit shape based on Central Plains visual experience, with no record in Chinese literature of how the Gaochang people originally referred to it. In summary, the essence of "modification of winemaking" was the selective adoption of foreign winemaking knowledge based on the Central Plains' own brewing traditions, dietary etiquette, and aesthetic preferences, embedding it into the local cultural order.

It is also noteworthy that "modification of winemaking" was a state-sponsored initiative led by the emperor himself. Emperor Taizong's "self-modification" indicates that this was not a spontaneous experiment by folk brewers but a conscious technological decision by the supreme ruler. After the modification, the wine was "distributed to ministers", promoting it from the top down through imperial grants. The term "modification" shows that the Tang court always maintained the initiative in technological assimilation. This state-led model of introducing and transforming foreign technologies was consistent with the Tang Dynasty's overall policy of frequently acquiring goods from the West, but the core message of "modification" was that acquisition did not equal imitation; the purpose of introduction was to incorporate it into one's own system, not to adapt one's own system to foreign knowledge.

From naming to techniques, from taste evaluation to visual pursuits, every aspect of "modification of winemaking" was guided by the Central Plains' own cultural order. It was precisely this "self-centered" transformation that laid the fundamental premise for grape wine to acquire a local cultural identity thereafter. If the Western winemaking techniques had been wholly adopted, grape wine might have remained merely a "foreign wine" in the Central Plains forever.

4. From tribute wine to famous wine: The institutionalized acceptance of grape wine

After the completion of technological transformation, grape wine entered the institutional system of the Central Plains, marking a crucial step in its identity transformation. Emperor Taizong "bestowed the improved grape wine upon his ministers", yet at this time, it remained an exclusive product of the court. However, within less than a century, the *Xin Tangshu: Geography Records* noted that grape wine was included in the local tributes of Taiyuan Prefecture, and similarly, grape wine was listed among the tributes

of Puzhou ^[10]. The system of local tributes involved the presentation of representative local products to the central government, and inclusion in this list signified official recognition by the court of the product as a local specialty. Both Taiyuan and Puzhou are located in the heart of the Hedong Circuit, far from the Western Regions. The inclusion of grape wine in their tribute lists indicates that by this time, it no longer relied on imports from the Western Regions but was produced on a large scale within the Central Plains. In other words, the tribute system formally certified grape wine as a “product of the Central Plains” at an institutional level—once included in the tribute list, it was no longer considered a “foreign product” but a normal member of the Central Plains’ product system. The tribute system formally certified grape wine as a “product of the Central Plains” at an institutional level.

When Li Zhao listed the famous wines of the world in his Supplement to the National History of the Tang Dynasty, he placed “Qianhe grape wine from Hedong” alongside the famous local wines of various circuits ^[11]. “Qianhe” refers to a brewing method without adding water, which the Tang people used to modify “grape”, indicating that their understanding had refined to specific craftsmanship schools—only “our own wines” were worth distinguishing in terms of craftsmanship quality. The refinement of this understanding is itself one of the signs of completed localization—only after a type of wine has been fully understood and digested will drinkers pay attention to its internal craftsmanship differences rather than lumping it in as a “foreign product.” In terms of origin, the origin label of grape wine shifted from “Gaochang” during the Zhenguan era to “Taiyuan” and “Puzhou” during the Kaiyuan and Tianbao eras, indicating a spatial relocation from the Western Regions to the Central Plains. This was not merely a change in industrial layout but a fundamental transformation in cultural identity—it was no longer “something from afar” but “something produced locally by us.”

5. From barbarian wine to Chinese product: The reconstruction of cultural identity

Beyond institutional acceptance, grape wine also needed to undergo an identity transformation at the cultural level. The wine shops run by Sogdian merchants and their Hu barmaids played an irreplaceable role. Rong Xinjiang pointed out that Sogdian merchants had established a chain settlement network along the Silk Road since the fourth century and had formed large expatriate communities in cities such as Chang’an and Luoyang by the Tang Dynasty ^[12]. Li Bai’s “laughing as I enter the Hu barmaid’s wine shop” and Wang Han’s “grape wine in luminous cups” indicate that grape wine had permeated aristocratic social and frontier military lives. The Hu barmaid’s wine shops were not only commercial venues but also spatial nodes where the Central Plains society came into daily contact with foreign beverages. Unlike the top-down dissemination through the court’s “bestowal upon ministers”, wine shops and military camps constituted a bottom-up infiltration path. It is worth introducing a comparative perspective: not all foreign beverages completed the localization path.

Kumis, also introduced to the Central Plains via the Silk Road, had a “Tongma Ling” established in the Han Dynasty court for its brewing ^[13]. However, kumis never shed its label as a grassland beverage by the Tang Dynasty, neither entering the tribute system nor appearing in records of famous wines ^[10]. Edward H. Schafer also noted that certain foreign beverages in the Central Plains never shed their “barbarian product” labels, with their acceptance varying significantly due to differences in material conditions and cultural compatibility ^[2]. The reason is that kumis brewing relies on horse milk, a raw material that could not be

obtained on a large scale in the agrarian regions of the Central Plains, making it technically impossible to integrate with the Central Plains' qu (fermentation starter) system. Its taste also differed greatly from the drinking preferences of the Central Plains, which lacked the technological basis to "modify and adjust" it. The key reason why grape wine could follow the localization path while kumis could not lies in the fact that grapes could be grown in the Central Plains, grape wine could be transformed using qu technology, and the finished product could be integrated into the existing tasting discourse and institutional framework of the Central Plains—modifiability is the prerequisite for localization.

Of course, this transformation did not uniformly cover all of Tang society. The localization of grape wine mainly occurred in the northern elite society centered around Chang'an and the surrounding Hedong production areas, remaining rare in the southern regions until the end of the Tang Dynasty. The localization of foreign things is constrained by multiple factors such as production area distribution, technological compatibility, and social strata, and its diffusion is always gradual and bounded. Even in the most open heyday of the Tang Dynasty, the localization of material culture was never a "comprehensive coverage" homogeneous process but was first completed in specific regions and social strata before radiating outward from the core areas.

6. Conclusion

The localization transformation of grape wine completed during the Tang Dynasty followed a three-stage path: "acquiring complete knowledge—screening and modifying based on local standards—redefining in institutional and social practices." The military conquest in the 14th year of the Zhenguan era provided a complete knowledge package including varieties and brewing methods. Emperor Taizong "modified and brewed wine" using the Central Plains' qu tradition as a yardstick for selection. The improved grape wine obtained a local identity through the tribute system, entered the Central Plains' wine sequence through records of famous wines, and ultimately completed the dissolution of its foreign label in folk consumption.

This case indicates that the localization of foreign things is not a simple spatial displacement but a systemic reconstruction of technology, institutions, and cultural cognition. In this process, foreign knowledge was not rejected, nor was it preserved intact; it was digested, absorbed, and regrew with a new appearance. Horse-milk grapes still grow on the land of Taiyuan, and the wine-making method can still be traced back to its origins in Gaochang, but the naming of varieties, modification of craftsmanship, evaluation of quality, and attribution of origin have all been rearranged according to Central Plains' rules. The reason why the Central Plains society could transform grape wine from a "barbarian product" into a "Chinese product" was not because grape wine itself was so good but because the Central Plains possessed a sufficiently mature brewing technology, a sufficiently complete institutional framework, and sufficiently rich cultural expression methods to reorganize and redefine foreign things. The way of addition and subtraction embodied in the two characters "modify and adjust" is precisely the concentrated expression of this subjectivity. Meanwhile, the different fates of grape wine and kumis also remind people that the matching of the cultural subjectivity of the receiving party with the modifiability of foreign things is the complete explanation for the cross-border transformation of material culture along the Silk Road.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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